



Rock Needs River: A Memoir About a Very Open Adoption

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From a story first told in the popular *New York Times* parenting blog comes a funny, touching memoir about a mother who welcomes more than a new daughter into her home.

After two years of waiting to adopt—slogging through paperwork and bouncing between hope and despair—a miracle finally happened for Vanessa McGrady. Her sweet baby, Grace, was a dream come true. Then Vanessa made a highly uncommon gesture: when Grace’s biological parents became homeless, Vanessa invited them to stay.

Without a blueprint for navigating the practical basics of an open adoption or any discussion of expectations or boundaries, the unusual living arrangement became a bottomless well of conflicting emotions and increasingly difficult decisions complicated by missed opportunities, regret, social chaos, and broken hearts.

Written with wit, candor, and compassion, *Rock Needs River* is, ultimately, Vanessa’s love letter to her daughter, one that illuminates the universal need for connection and the heroine’s journey to find her tribe.

Rock Needs River: A Memoir About a Very Open Adoption Details

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From Reader Review Rock Needs River: A Memoir About a Very Open Adoption for online ebook

Char says

This was one of my Amazon First Reads picks for the month of January.

"From a story first told on the popular New York Times parenting blog comes a funny, touching memoir about a mother who welcomes more than a new daughter into her home"

Oh, how misleading this little blurb is! Why? Because there isn't much funny or touching about this book. To be honest, it isn't even really a book about an open adoption since the author barely touches on the actual process and doesn't seem to have any understanding of how to handle it. There's no real explanations, insight or advice. Where there should have been array of information, she just kind of skimmed over everything. However, she does go on and on about her sexual exploits and failed relationships in much more thorough detail so if you're interested in any of that then this is the story for you. Honestly, this book failed on so many levels that it would be difficult to name them all so instead I'll tell you all the things I did like about it.

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I got nothing.

Beth Ellor says

A life fully lived

Vanessa McGrady pulls no punches in describing her own life and her transformation into a passionate mother. Because I'm also a late-blooming passionate mother (since 1988) so much of it rings true. She upends the sentimentality that often surrounds adoption to the uninitiated. Her recognition of the adoption triad and respect for the deep unknowns is such a relief, amid so much psychobabble. And her narrative, while familiar in feeling, also demonstrates the totally unpredictable and ungeneralizable (?) truth that no two families, no two adoptions are the same.

I flew through this book in two days, but will return to it - a profound and eminently readable soul baring.

Goth Gone Grey says

More about the author than the adoption - very self-absorbed

I wish more of the book had the upbeat, optimistic style of this example:

"My parents taught me how to create a tribe. Some of my blood-related family is in my tribe, to be sure, but most of its members I've picked up along the way, starting when I was four with my best friend, Lisa, who lived downstairs and who is closer to me today than any blood sister could be. My tribe is hilarious and loyal and helpful and made up of fragile souls and supersonic minds and great, big, fat beating hearts, and I wouldn't be who I am without them. My parents taught me how to find and keep people. And maybe, maybe, I could be a mom and bring everything I knew to a little soul, and we could love each other in a way only a mother and daughter could. Or should."

Alas, it's not to be. The writing style is conversational, but in that uncomfortable, "let me tell you all my tales of woe" way that makes you mentally check out before you can physically escape from the person. She writes of her failed relationships, longing for a child, and the adoption from a self-centered, ugly to read perspective.

There's an overriding, uncomfortable theme that the author knows best, and those around her can't do things right. While this is sometimes accurate - impaired driving is an obvious poor choice - more often than not it comes across as judgemental and rude. Not all of the thoughts about each situation need to be shared for it to still remain an honest memoir.

Her perspective on her daughter's birth parents is difficult to read. She's insultingly surprised when their temporary home is spotless, and assumes he's lying about his other daughter. Their perspective on the experience is not truly offered here - even when she says she visited them to hear it - as she ran away from them when they told her what happened, and focused on how hearing it hurt her more than what it did to them.

Tami Sullivan says

Not my favorite read

The author paints herself in a virtuous tone, but instead presents herself as needy and victimized. I was disappointed. Pass on this depressing, self-congratulatory mess of a book.

Pattie says

I got this as a free Amazon download, and, as the product of a closed adoption, I was eager to learn about the author's experience with open adoption.

The story about her journey to obtain a child was somewhat interesting. And it rightly portrays infant adoption exactly as it is – as the last chance of obtaining a child in order to fulfill the need of the woman who has tried every other way to have a baby.

The author emerges as a person who blames people for disappointing her even they are clear up front about exactly who they are. She makes bad choices in partners, and then blames the men for being exactly who they clearly are. When she finally starts dating her husband, she knows he is still married, but is surprised

that his wife does not react well to finding out that he is cheating. She knows her husband is a less-than-ambitious guy saddled with a lot of financial burdens from his past, and yet blames him for not contributing more to the household. She sees right away that the birthparents are lost souls, and yet she blames repeatedly them for not shaping up and either getting jobs or signing up for the VA benefits the birthfather had earned (to her credit, she acknowledges trying to impose her values on them, but even her acknowledgement is subtly shaming). She provides constant little digs about their irresponsibility, along the line of "And as of now, I'm still waiting to receive (whatever thing they may have promised to send her)." Also, why is it necessary to the narrative to point out repeatedly that while she herself is, of course, completely sober, her ex-husband is not. It doesn't add much, and just feels self-justifying and unnecessarily harsh.

Also frustrating is how much this short memoir is peppered with descriptions of all the times her daughter makes it clear how much she loves her Mama (the author), choosing the author and rejecting those lost souls who gave her birth (especially Bill, who is a "liar" – which is never explained). And the descriptions of how gorgeous, brilliant, insightful and perfect happy her beautiful and delightful little fairy child is get a little irritating, but that could be just the bitterness of a reader whose own adoptive mother found her somewhat less than delightful.

As many other readers have said, it would have been good to hear more from Bill and Bridgett. The author describes how the nurses at the hospital badger and harass them to consider keeping their daughter, and yet they say they felt pressured to relinquish. It would have been fascinating to hear more about that gap in perception.

Kimberley Moran says

Vanessa's story is exceptional but it's her writing that pulls you in close and keeps you there. I opened the book expecting to read a few pages to see what I was getting into and closed it three hours later on the last page.

Natalie Joy says

I'm disappointed that this was my first completed read of the year! I am glad that it was a free read via Amazon's Kindle First program because I cannot imagine wanting to spend money on this fluff piece.

The book blurb suggests a "funny" and "witty" story of a mother's 2 year wait to adopt and then the surprise twist of taking her baby's birth parents into her home when they end up homeless. It takes FIVE CHAPTERS to actually get to the "adoption" part of the story--those five chapters are an absolutely boring, self-absorbed account of the author's life wandering from city to city and a weirdly specific list of ex-boyfriends, their names, a short recount of her relationship with each man, and a final explanation on why the relationship didn't last. Background details of the author for a memoir is fine, but this part meandered for way too long and didn't actually add anything to the story. Talking about her shaky relationship with her parents and how that affected her own parenting years later is relevant and I wish she'd spent more time on that instead of on her former random relationships.

After she takes her baby's birth parents into her house we see she is compassionate, I think she really is, but she basically throws job applications and money at the young couple and can't figure out why "nothing ever comes of it." Clearly there's something more going on in the lives of this young couple that is keeping them

from truly getting the help they need but unfortunately there's never really any explanation of what it could be. Frustratingly, towards the end of the book the author sits down for an interview with the couple after they've moved to another state and she spends a paragraph talking about how they revealed feeling totally sidelined in the adoption and were treated badly by the adoption agency, hospital workers, and other people involved. And that's it! Just a paragraph! Here is where I feel like we could have gotten more into the lives of these birth parents and maybe explored bias in the system and laws or procedures that favor either birth or adoptive parents and shed more light on the issues the birth parents dealt with and how that may have affected their trust in all charitable agencies years later, but no.

The actual story part of this memoir would have been better as a magazine article or essay. There is so much rambling, irrelevant information in this book that really feels like it's there just to bring it up to the right page count to be published as a book. I wouldn't read it again.

Heather Macaulay-ditaranto says

Entertaining at first but quickly turned into a narcissistic account of one woman's (the author, perhaps?) Sexual encounters, work history and selfish desire to have a baby when obviously she wasn't meant to be a mother.

I was disappointed that this story appeared to be the memoirs of a self applauding wannabe. No real depth to this book.

Lakshmi says

I picked this book because as a parent in an open adoption, I hoped to glean insights on how others do it and how to get better at it. While this is a vulnerable, honest look at what open adoption looks like, it made me sad to see the child's parents history, their weakest moments laid bare for anyone to read. While they will get past this phase in their lives, these words will live on. I feel broken for the child who will one day read this and wonder why this was shared.

I wish the book had emphasized how to work through these issues just from the author's pov without sharing as much of the other characters lives. I also wish at the end, all that interview and the birth parents thoughts were shared as is. It is important for people in the adoption triad to know the good, the bad and the ugly.

In all honesty, I am a parent who shares a lot of my life and that of my children online. I straddle this line between okay and too much every day. This book is an eye-opener for me on how I should navigate this writing journey.

On the plus side, the language is great, the pacing excellent. The author is a good writer and it shows.

Julie Christine says

This is the story of a woman growing into her heart. With cozy candor that invites the reader to pour a tall glass of malbec, kick off her shoes and curl into the sofa, Vanessa McGrady shares her journey of choice and circumstance to becoming a mother.

One summer day, I was lolling around in the bath, and, inexplicably, with no apparent trigger, I wanted a baby. I was nearing thirty. I felt an allover tug in my body, a missing of someone I didn't know. Every single cell in me ached. The tears started dripping down my face, slipping into the bathwater

More than a decade passes, years that see McGrady pregnant, then not, her body discarding the new lives forming inside of her with wanton disregard for her keening desire. Her relationships and romances are ancillary; these men fall short in large and small ways. What remains is the certainty that her +1 is meant to be a son or daughter.

Then in her early forties, McGrady settles into love. She marries Peter and together they pursue open adoption. Two years into the process, *A call from Linda, the social worker, came in. After two years of filling out paperwork, chasing wispy, insignificant leads, wondering if every single call I ever got would be the call, there it was.*

McGrady meets Bridgett, twenty-eight, and Bill, thirty-eight, struggling musicians devoted to each other, but realistic about their inability to responsibly parent a child. They lived itinerant lives, underemployed, without a stable home. A baby did not fit into their dreams of making it as musicians. Red flags wave wildly when Bill contacts Vanessa after their first meeting, demanding she make an immediate decision. Bridgett is nearly due, the couple are facing eviction, previous potential parents have fallen out of favor for their unwillingness to cooperate. It feels ominous and fraught, but McGrady takes her chances.

Days later, Bridgett goes into early labor. McGrady, who had been out of town on a work trip, arrives after the birth. Bridgett, Bill, and Peter are there to greet her. Peter hands her the baby, who Bridgett and Bill have named Kelli Mae. The baby girl who would soon become Grace McGrady. *I held her in my arms, looking deep into her squishy, sweet face. I gently rocker her, and it felt like a dance. I realized only at that moment, I'd had little to no experience with a newborn. It just felt right. Normal, no reason for tears. Only a very calm, solid kind of joy. My new normal. Me and this kid.*

If only it were that simple. Before Grace's third birthday, Peter has moved out and Bill and Bridgett have moved in. McGrady's dream of becoming a mama has come true. But now she is obliged to captain a boat through waters for which there is no helpful map to be found in a search on Amazon.com In reaching out a compassionate hand to support her child's homeless biological parents, she may be putting at risk the mental health of the life she has moved heaven and earth to save.

The memoirist faces a dual, often conflicting challenge: to make the personal universal, and to make the universal interesting. Thwarted attempts at motherhood, from miscarriage to still birth to unsuccessful adoption, are grist for the personal essay mill (full disclosure: I've published several). We're invited into the author's pain, cringing through the raw moments that we can't imagine sharing with our colleagues, our family, perhaps even our partners, much less with a host of strangers. And yet we can't look away, because we measure ourselves against the writer, in awe of the vulnerability and truths shared, astonished that someone is able to articulate *our* particular pain, releasing us from our emotional isolation. That's what great memoir does — even if the events and circumstances are unique to the writer, the "a-ha" moments conveyed become part of a shared experience of the heart.

Vanessa McGrady has crafted such a memoir, great in its ability to hold the reader rapt to the page, wondering how the author will hold all of this together and where she, and Grace, will be by the end. Written with compassion and humor, *Rock Needs River* simply flows with love.

My gratitude to the author and her publisher for providing me with an Advance Reader Copy.

Sharon Jones says

Not one of the best

I did not care for the main character, Vanessa. She seemed self-centered, hard to please and unwilling to make any commitment. She went through men like they were there to please her and if anything went astray in her thinking, they were toast. She allowed herself to do what she wanted in a relationship. I have doubts that she is the "good" mother she makes herself out to be. Not my pick for a steady Mother.

Stephen says

“Rock Needs River” is more than a story about an “open adoption,” whereby the parents putting a child up for adoption remain part of that child’s life.

Author Vanessa McGrady’s personal journey toward adoptive motherhood details the process by which she was able to locate a couple desiring to give up their daughter so as to focus on their dreams as musicians. You will read about groups she joined as part of that process, mistakes she made which turned her ears red, the anxious, hopeful waiting and the rather torturous path she had to traverse since the few existing roadmaps were cursory and particular at best.

The parents, Bridgett and Bill, are a curious study: a pair of artists somehow inured to a hardscrabble life of homeless tent-living and off-the-grid shack habitation. The author explains her tireless, well-meaning efforts at keeping the feckless couple in her/their daughter’s life and to help get them on their feet. They don’t seem to want a better life, or view working and fitting their life into a paycheck as better than methodically picking through dumpsters for their necessities. They are respectful, talented and smart, but mistrustful, elusive and, ultimately, too far afield to become part of Vanessa and Grace’s (the little girl) life together.

Although “Rock Needs River” opens the door on a particular type of adoption arrangement, it is no simple “how-to” if only because you’re not Vanessa McGrady. Important as her adoption story is, the recounting of the path by which she made that decision is equally novel.

Here we have a young American woman, the product of a broken home, imbued with a good education and significant freedoms those of her gender once only dreamed about. Hers is a story of youth out to savor life, love, and travel, still cutting paths through territories for which there are few maps, making mistakes, learning from them, absorbing set backs, and then forging ahead.

The prose is very smart, lively and, though McGrady’s story is a personal one, there is a never a sense of overindulgence with her “self.” Her closing discussion about the prevalence of adoption in the literature and, thus, history of Western Civilization is enlightening and important to the book. She employs a light tone laced with humor and observations often apropos of nothing, yet somehow apropos, so that with “Rock” the author has fashioned a complete and multi-layered piece of lovely literature.

Erin says

I came across this book as a free download from Amazon Prime. I almost bailed just 20 pages in (mostly due to swearing) but decided to stick with it because it was describing a life and circumstances foreign to my

own life and circumstances. While somewhat interesting, I found the writing and pacing weak. The author tries to be open and vulnerable, but her self analysis more often swings towards justification and rationalization than true awareness. Some of her life mottos are completely different from the type of motto I'd want in my own life.

Julie Robichaux says

Oh, man, the author was *so close* to getting it...and just never did. I was aching for her to develop some sort of insight — any sort of insight! — into why she felt and behaved as she did towards her daughter's bio-parents.

Instead, over and over again, I read confused complaints about how they *disappointed* her — and very little acknowledgement that her expectations may have been unfair. Very little awareness that it was presumptuous to impose her own standards on them, and that her position of comparative privilege warranted real delicacy. Very little in the way of what felt like authentic empathy. And very little growth, as far as I could track.

Although plenty of readers felt the author was generous in that she let Bill and Bridgett stay at her home when they were homeless, my overall takeaway was that she didn't have the kind of generosity that means the most: generosity of spirit.

For these reasons, I found the entire story off-putting, even without taking into account the style of the telling: more bloggy than booklike. That's not bad in itself, but a different approach might have made the narcissism go down a little more easily.

Sarah Hyatt says

This book fails miserably at all the things it claims to be.

It perfectly fits my usual interests -- memoir! adoption! OPEN adoption! I was so excited to see a book that fit my odd little reading niche so nicely, especially for free. I dove into it, hoping it would be my first great read of the year.

It was not.

From the memoir perspective -- it's just not a good book. It's vague and too quick in places it shouldn't be, and long and rambling in others. It reads similarly to a teenage or early college essay, just a lot of information and correct grammar and syntax but no overarching point or skill to craft the narrative. The author basically shares the minutia of her personal life, including a long and boring list of ex-lovers (though unfortunately the catchy songs of Taylor Swift).

It's an odd reading experience because while nothing really happens, it moves very quickly, skimming along on the surface without giving much chance for reflection. I felt like I could never really settle in and get to know the characters, the author included, in a way that would make me want to see what happened next. It was just reading the telling, telling, telling of a series of too-loosely connected events in the life of complete stranger.

It didn't really cut it as a memoir. And that's without the adoption piece added.

Add the adoption piece and... oh my. Here it becomes more of a dumpster fire. The author sort of describes the adoption process but not really -- the whole thing falls victim to the same badly-written and poorly-paced "memoir" of her previous lovers. We kind of hear about the training process, but not much. She makes some general, surface-level explanatory statements about adoption that are the equivalent of an adoption agency brochure or an awkward group presentation on "What is Adoption?" in a 100-level college course. She spends a stunningly narcissistic and self-indulgent amount of time on an internet argument, where she got (rightfully) attacked for asking to adopt someone's baby. And so it goes. (I'm 2/2 on Taylor Swift references in this review and that has been the best thing to come out of reading this book).

The whole book strikes a tone that is somehow beyond the typical adoptive-parent-centric, adopter-as-savior tone into one where literally everyone surrounding the author is treated only as a prop. No other characters are ever developed as actual people, and I would say they're only used to further the narrative... except there isn't even much narrative. The depth and detail given for most events in this book is of the sort that would maybe be appropriate for an 800-word essay, and even then it feels off somehow. Not enough, and not the right quality of detail.

It's not a very good book, from a reading perspective, and from an adoption perspective it's at best useless (adopting a kid doesn't mean you have an interesting story or one that needs told, *please can people realize this*) and at worst harmful (the author's attitude towards her kids' biological family is dismissive and self-centered, it's *yet another adoptive parent story*, the ethics of private infant adoption are never considered, and so on).

So much for my first read of the year being a lovely adoption memoir. Back to my weird British mysteries and ghosts.

Worth mentioning -- if you are looking for an open adoption memoir, *God and Jetfire* was, in my opinion, a lovely one. I don't get any compensation for saying that. I just really liked that book, found the writing to be beautiful, and I thought it was very humanizing of all parties.
